

# Q3

## Why do we care about atmospheric ozone?

Ozone in the stratosphere absorbs a large part of the Sun's biologically harmful ultraviolet radiation. Stratospheric ozone is considered "good" ozone because of this beneficial role. In contrast, ozone formed at Earth's surface in excess of natural amounts is considered "bad" ozone because it is harmful to humans, plants, and animals. Natural ozone near the surface and in the lower atmosphere plays an important beneficial role in chemically removing pollutants from the atmosphere.

**Good ozone.** Stratospheric ozone is considered good for humans and other life forms because it absorbs ultraviolet-B (UV-B) radiation from the Sun (see Figure Q3-1). If not absorbed, UV-B radiation would reach Earth's surface in amounts that are harmful to a variety of life forms. In humans, increased exposure to UV-B radiation increases the risks of skin cancer, cataracts, and a suppressed immune system. UV-B radiation exposure before adulthood and cumulative exposure are both important health risk factors. Excessive UV-B exposure also can damage terrestrial plant life, single-cell organisms, and aquatic ecosystems. Other UV radiation, UV-A, which is not absorbed significantly by ozone, causes premature aging of the skin.

**Protecting good ozone.** In the mid-1970s, it was discovered that gases containing chlorine and bromine atoms released by human activities could cause stratospheric ozone depletion (see Q6 and Q7). These gases, referred to as halogen source gases, and as ozone-depleting substances (ODSs), chemically release their chlorine and bromine atoms after they reach the stratosphere. Ozone depletion increases surface UV-B radiation above naturally occurring amounts. International efforts have been successful in protecting the ozone layer through controls on ODS production and consumption (see Q15 and Q16).

**Bad ozone.** Ozone near Earth's surface in excess of natural amounts is considered bad ozone. It is formed by reactions involving human-made pollutant gases. Increasing surface ozone above natural levels is harmful to humans, plants, and other living systems because ozone reacts strongly to destroy or alter many biological molecules. High ozone exposure caused by air pollution reduces crop yields and forest growth. In humans, exposure to high levels of ozone can reduce lung capacity; cause chest pains, throat irritation, and coughing; and worsen pre-existing health conditions related to the heart and lungs. In addition, increases in tropospheric ozone lead to a warming of Earth's surface because ozone is a greenhouse gas (see Q18). The negative effects of excess tropospheric ozone contrast sharply with the protection from harmful UV-B radiation afforded by an abundance of stratospheric ozone.

**Reducing bad ozone.** Limiting the emission of certain common pollutants reduces the production of excess ozone in the air surrounding humans, plants, and animals. Natural emissions from the biosphere, mainly from trees, also participate in reactions that produce ozone. Major sources of pollutants include large cities where fossil fuel consumption and industrial activities are greatest. Many programs around the globe have already been successful in reducing or limiting the emission of pollutants that cause production of excess ozone near Earth's surface.

**Natural ozone.** In the absence of human activities, ozone would still be present near Earth's surface and throughout the troposphere and stratosphere because ozone is a natural component of the clean atmosphere. Ozone plays important roles in the atmosphere beyond absorbing UV radiation. For example, ozone initiates the chemical removal of many pollutants, such as carbon monoxide (CO) and nitrogen oxides

(NO<sub>x</sub>), as well as some greenhouse gases, such as methane (CH<sub>4</sub>). In addition, the absorption of UV-B radiation by ozone is a natural source of heat in the stratosphere, causing temperatures to increase with altitude. Stratospheric temperatures affect the balance of ozone production and destruction processes (see Q2) and air motions that redistribute ozone throughout the stratosphere (see Q4).

**Figure Q3-1. UV protection by the ozone layer.**

The ozone layer resides in the stratosphere and surrounds the entire Earth. UV-B radiation (280- to 315-nanometer (nm) wavelength) from the Sun is strongly absorbed in this layer. As a result, the amount of UV-B reaching Earth's surface is greatly reduced. UV-A (315- to 400-nm wavelength), visible light, and other solar radiation are not strongly absorbed by the ozone layer. Human exposure to UV-B radiation increases the risks of skin cancer, cataracts, and a suppressed immune system. UV-B radiation exposure can also damage terrestrial plant life, single-cell organisms, and aquatic ecosystems.

